

## **CHAPTER 5: OPEN SPACE AND CONSERVATION LANDS ASSESSMENT**

### **Introduction**

Existing open space and conservation lands are addressed collectively in the Open Space and Conservation Lands map. This map represents parts of a statewide “green infrastructure network” that are of conservation interest and currently managed for conservation and as open space.

The Open Space and Conservation Lands assessment is different from the other assessments in the Conservation Planning Tool; instead of valuing and ranking data representing various resources, existing data related to managed conservation lands and passive recreation lands was simply overlaid into a single map. This map is intended to inform the user about the location of existing conservation lands that are in “permanent conservation” and those that are managed by federal, state, local, and private entities.

Understanding what lands are already under some sort of protection or are otherwise actively managed for conservation provides a valuable opportunity to plan effectively to:

- Expand those areas for conservation,
- Make connections between them, and
- Fill in gaps with additional lands containing natural resources with conservation value.

### **Data Sources**

The current Open Space and Conservation Lands map includes:

1. All known federal lands owned by
  - U.S. Department of Defense
  - U.S. Forest Service
  - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
  - National Park Service
  
2. All lands managed for open space and owned by the state of North Carolina, including various state agencies:
  - Division of Parks and Recreation
    - State Parks
    - State Trails
    - State Natural Areas
    - State Recreation Areas
    - Potential expansion areas
  - Division of Coastal Management
  - Division of Health and Human Services
  - Division of Marine Fisheries

- Ecosystem Enhancement Program
  - Wildlife Resources Commission
    - Game lands
    - Boating access points
  - Plant Conservation Program
  - Soil and Water Conservation
  - Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
    - NC Forest Service
  - Department of Cultural Resources (where appropriate)
  - Department of Transportation
  - Museum of Natural Sciences
  - NC Zoo
  - UNC system universities and colleges
3. County and local government lands managed for open space (when provided)
4. Private conservation lands managed for open space (when provided)
- Conservation groups (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, National Audubon Society, N.C. Herpetological Society, The Conservation Fund)
  - Local land trusts
  - Utility companies

The data layers included in this assessment map and their importance for identifying current and planned open space and conservation lands are briefly described below.

<b>Data Layer</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Date</b>
Managed Areas (Lands Managed for Conservation) – includes Conservation Easements and lands managed for conservation by Federal, State, Local and Private entities	NHP	2012
State Parks System (including Future Needs)	DPR	2012
New Parks for A New Century (Potential Conservation Units)	DPR	2012
Regional Trails - Existing and Proposed	DPR	2012
State Natural and Scenic Rivers	DPR	2011
Boat Access	WRC	2012

### **Managed Areas (Lands Managed for Conservation) – MAREAs**

The North Carolina Natural Heritage Program developed the Managed Areas (or MAREA) dataset to document public- and privately-owned lands and easements that are of conservation interest. The property boundaries used in this coverage were acquired from a wide variety of sources, and in many cases these boundaries are approximate. Ownership is categorized in this dataset as follows:

Easement - The area indicated is subject to an easement held by the entity listed in the Owner field.

Federal - The Government of the United States of America owns the property.

Local - A local government entity, e.g., county or city, owns the property.

Private - A private individual or organization owns the property.

State - The State of North Carolina owns the property.

### **State Parks System and New Parks for a New Century**

Data for the State Parks System and New Parks for a New Century are developed and maintained by the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. These data include existing State Parks, Approved Future Expansion Areas, Future Expansion Study Areas, and point locations for New Parks for a New Century (shown as Potential Conservation Units on the Open Space and Conservation Lands map).

As part of the DENR initiative to accelerate land protection in North Carolina, starting with the Million Acre Open Space Goal passed by the General Assembly in 1999, the Division of Parks and Recreation developed a system to evaluate priority sites across the state as potential additions to the state parks system.

The 1987 State Parks Act says that the North Carolina State Parks System is intended to:

- Include representative examples of North Carolina's archaeological, geological, biological, scenic and recreational resources, and
- Preserve and manage these resources as part of the heritage of the people of the state.

To fulfill the mandate to include within the parks system representative examples of North Carolina resources, these resources needed to be defined and categorized. Resource "themes" within each resource category were defined by teams of experts from within and outside the division. Themes consisted of clusters of similar or related resource types, such as Spruce-Fir Forests, Barrier Islands and Shoreline, Prehistoric Villages and Scenic Waterfalls.

The natural and cultural resources within the existing parks system were evaluated in comparison to the defined themes to identify themes that were

inadequately represented in the parks system. Themes with the least representation were identified as priorities for addition to the parks system.

The Division of Parks and Recreation then developed criteria for evaluating individual sites for suitability and priority. The evaluation criteria provide a method to numerically rank potential sites, as well as a way to remove unsuitable sites from consideration. The evaluation criteria are divided into **minimum and measured criteria**.

The **minimum criteria** are used for initial evaluation of additions to the proposed state parks system. Sites which do not meet these minimum criteria are removed from consideration. The four basic criteria are:

- Statewide significance of the site's resource themes;
- Size (sufficient acreage to protect principal resources and to provide appropriate facilities with minimal impacts to principal resources);
- Absence of incompatible features (e.g., threats from roads, intrusive development, incompatible vistas and air, water and noise pollution); and
- Public access free of limitations inhibiting management and public use.

If a site meets the minimum criteria requirements, it is then evaluated using **measured criteria**, which include:

- Number of high priority resource themes present on the site;
- Rarity of theme(s);
- Overall threat to theme(s);
- Degree of threat to individual site / urgency of acquisition;
- Presence of rare and endangered species;
- Interconnection of the site with other protected areas;
- Quality of resources on the site and presence of superlatives (one of a kind, biggest or best example);
- Regional demand for state parks system units that are staffed and open to the public; and
- Suitability for providing high quality recreation.

Each of the above criteria generates a score for an individual site and the scores are combined to develop an overall score for each site. Using these criteria, the Division of Parks and Recreation evaluated dozens of sites around the state. Sites were nominated by division staff, other agencies, local governments and the general public. Many of the sites were previously identified in biological inventories conducted by the Natural Heritage Program. Sites that met the minimum criteria and scored well on the measured criteria were included on a list of potential new state park unit acquisitions. The sites were located in all regions of the state and included a wide variety of natural resources and recreational opportunities.

The list of potential new park units is called “New Parks for a New Century.” Some of the sites have already been authorized by the General Assembly and acquired for inclusion within the State Parks System. As additional sites are discovered or nominated, each new proposal will be evaluated according to the criteria above.

### **Regional Trails – Existing and Planned**

A regional trails inventory that includes data on existing and planned local, state, and federal trails and greenways has been compiled from partners across the state and is maintained by the NC Division of Parks and Recreation. These data are intended to aid in cooperation and the efficient use of resources to plan and manage trails that cross jurisdictional boundaries. Note that these data do not necessarily include all existing and planned trails in the state.

### **State Natural and Scenic Rivers**

These data are contributed by the NC Division of Parks and Recreation and represent state-designated rivers that are units of the State Parks System. In 1971, the Natural and Scenic Rivers System was created by the General Assembly to preserve and protect certain free flowing rivers, their water quality, and their adjacent lands for the benefit of present and future generations. The Natural and Scenic Rivers Act established criteria and methods for inclusion of components to the system. Currently there are four designated State Rivers.

### **Boat Access**

Boat access location data are developed and maintained by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, Division of Engineering Services. These data represent public boating access areas owned or maintained by the Commission or constructed in partnership with the Commission.

### **Other Future Open Space Needs**

To assess the future open space needs in the state’s natural network, opportunities can be evaluated on the basis of what is currently prioritized in the focused assessments that comprise the Conservation Planning Tool. As lands become available within the identified priority areas, conservation efforts should be considered to conserve priority core areas and to fill the “gaps” to complete vital connections.

This evaluation of priority areas for conservation is limited to what is currently known to be significant. Specific amounts of land and natural resources required to complete a sustainable network of functioning ecosystems cannot be determined without further focused field study and research. A comprehensive

understanding of the overall future needs of the network as a whole, as scientifically-based projections, will be addressed as more information is gathered from the appropriate agencies.